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ABSTRACT

Noting that one of the most frequently cited recommendations for improving school safety has been to increase parental involvement, this report explores the variety of ways that parents can be involved in their children's education. The report delineates factors placing a child at risk for underachievement at school and notes that while parents cannot always change these risk factors, they have a great influence over many challenges. In addition, the report lists obstacles encountered by parents in trying to participate in their child's education and notes that examining each barrier can make possible the creation of new approaches that foster participation. The report further maintains that greater understanding is needed about the areas of involvement that are most effective in improving student achievement. Several ways parents can become directly involved in their child's education are delineated, and indirect influences of parents in the school environment, at home, and in the community are described. In addition, the report describes possible practices schools can use to maximize their investment in family and school connections. Finally, the report describes the Alliance Schools Initiative as a model program, a community-based program to increase student achievement in low-income areas throughout Texas. The report concludes by noting that although additional research is needed to understand the types of parental involvement that are most beneficial, it is clear that students achieve more when parents provide good reading materials, monitor television viewing, supervise homework, and hold reasonably high expectations of their children's performance. (Contains 48 notes.) (KB)

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ED 436 268

MEASURING UP
The State of Texas Education

A SPECIAL REPORT OF THE TEXAS KIDS COUNT PROJECT

PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT IN EDUCATION

In the afttermath of recent school shootings around the country, one of the most frequently cited recommendations for improving school safety has been to increase parental involvement. Research has shown that parents can increase children's academic success through involvement with schools and communities.[1] Parental involvement improves student morale, attitudes, and academic achievement across all subject areas.[2] Thus, by getting involved, parents reduce children's risk of academic failure and dropping out before graduation. Children's behavior and social adjustment improve when parents' are proactive with schools and neighborhoods to cultivate an environment that promotes learning.[3]

This report will explore a variety of ways that mothers and fathers can be involved in their children's education. Involvement varies from family to family and can take many different forms—from communicating with teachers and helping children with homework to participating in school policymaking groups.[4] This report discusses the importance of parental involvement in education and addresses some of the barriers parents encounter when trying to be involved. Schools and parents can act in a positive way to increase involvement at the family level. Finally, a model program is described as an example of how this can be accomplished.

The Importance of Parental Involvement

Environmental, social, and economic factors have a powerful effect on student performance. Any one of the following factors place a child at greater risk of underachieving in school:[5]

Growing up in poverty
Inadequate learning opportunities
Exposure to drugs and/or violence at home or school
Lack of after-school care
Dysfunctional families
Inadequate Health Care
Run down schools
Neighborhood distress
Few role models
Poor nutrition
Teen pregnancy

Children who don't feel safe walking to and from school have added stress in the classroom. This stress can impede academic progress as well.[6] Studies show that low-achieving students are more likely to be disruptive in the classroom and are more likely to threaten other students and teachers.[7]

While parents cannot always change these factors, they can have a great influence over many of these challenges. Parents, working with schools and the community, are a vital resource in improving schools and neighborhoods.[8] Further, mothers and fathers contribute significantly in creating a nurturing environment in which children can grow and learn.[9]

Barriers to Parental Involvement

Many parents encounter obstacles to participating in their children's education. Barriers to involvement reported by parents and teachers include[10]:

- differing ideas among parents and teachers on what constitutes involvement,
- a less than welcoming atmosphere toward visitors in schools and classrooms,
- negative or neutral communication from schools,
- insufficient training for teachers on how to reach out to both mothers and fathers,
- lack of parental education and parenting skills,
- time pressures,
- job pressures, and

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- language barriers.

Parents tend to be less involved in the educational process as their children get older. A study of the U.S. Department of Education found that nationwide, as children grow older, contacts between families and schools decline both in number and in the positive nature of such contacts. Although 52 percent of interactions are positive and only 20 percent are negative in the first grade, by seventh grade, positive contacts drop to 36 percent and negative contacts increase to 33 percent. Volunteerism drops during these years, as well, from 33 percent of involved parents in first grade to 8 percent of involved parents in seventh grade.[11] This decline in involvement is the result, in part, of a variety of challenges that families face that make their participation difficult.

Examining each barrier to involvement makes possible the creation of new approaches that foster optimal participation on the part of mothers and fathers. For instance, negative contact with schools can contribute to an unfriendly climate that reduces the likelihood of parental involvement. If parents themselves had negative experiences in their own schooling, they may already have formed a negative view of schools.[12] These parents can view their children's school as hostile territory. Parents who are not comfortable speaking English may have experienced discrimination and humiliation because of the language difference when they were students. The lack of bilingual staff in schools contributes to feelings of powerlessness on the part of non-English speaking parents when attempting to advocate for or resolve problems for their children.[13] Finding ways to make mothers and fathers feel more comfortable and welcomed in the school would improve the communication between school and parents.

Parents in economically disadvantaged families can face particular difficulties when attempting to participate in their children's education. As an example, some parents, especially those with low-wage jobs, face losing their jobs if they take time off work to attend meetings and functions. In addition, parents who are not well-educated themselves may find it difficult to help their children with homework.[14] Helping low-literate adults improve their basic skills has a direct and measurable impact on children's education and on the quality of their lives.[15] Furthermore, children of parents who need and participate in literacy programs improve their grades, test scores, and reading skills. They are also less likely to drop out of school.[16]

While research has pointed to the benefits of parental involvement, less is understood about the areas of involvement that are most effective in improving achievement. Differences sometimes exist between parents and teachers regarding how parents should be involved in education. Some educators prefer traditional types of parent involvement such as volunteering to help with activities planned by the school and helping children with their homework.[17] Although, educators may be very supportive of parents who volunteer to chaperone the school dance, for instance, they may oppose parent involvement in academic planning or school policy, fearing parents will be too interfering or critical of their children's teachers.[18] The challenge is to find ways for parents and schools to work together in a way that is not only mutually beneficial but also improves the lives of children.

What Parents Can Do

Parents are their children's best advocates. Parents' willingness to contact teachers on a regular basis about their children's progress is perhaps the first step to becoming involved in their children's education. Armed with good information about a child's performance, parents can proceed in both direct and indirect ways to influence the child's progress. Mothers and fathers can become directly involved in children's education by:

- overseeing the child's homework time;[19]
- setting a time each day for homework to be done, and checking the child's work for completeness and understanding;[20]
- limiting time spent with friends and watching television;[21] and
- providing support for educators, essential leadership for programs, and ideas for improvements in the education system.[22]
- taking advantage of opportunities to become involved with school administration and policy development—for example, attend school board meetings and join the PTA.

Children's education may be indirectly influenced as parents become a familiar presence in the school by volunteering to help in the library, the school cafeteria, monitoring the halls, selling tickets, and chaperoning parties and field trips.[23] As parents' faces become familiar in the school environment, natural opportunities may arise for communicating with their children's teachers. Furthermore, as educators witness parents' concerned involvement, they may become more receptive to parents' communication regarding their children's needs.

According to U.S. Department of Education research findings, children's success in reading comprehension is directly related to the availability of reading materials in the home.[24] It has also been found that children respond positively when parents set high but realistic standards for achievement. Parents' expectations should be set high enough to give the child something to reach for, but not so high the child will become discouraged.[25] Finally, children need positive encouragement in the form of praise, expressed interest, and rewarded effort.[26]

Television can be an educational tool, but without supervision children tend to spend too much time watching lower quality programming and not engaging their own minds in active learning. U.S. Department of Education research found that while 73 percent of parents desire to limit their children's television viewing, many find it difficult to monitor these limits due to their own busy schedules.[27] The U.S. Department of Education reports, however, that a significant loss in academic achievement results when children spend more than 10 hours a week watching television.[28] Therefore, it is advantageous for parents to control the amount of television their children are watching.

Monitoring children's homework has also been shown to increase academic achievement. It is not necessary for parents to know all the answers. It is more important to demonstrate their interest by providing a quiet, well-lit place for doing homework, encouraging children's efforts, being available for questions, and being willing to discuss material the child is learning.[29]

A well-established institution in most schools is the Parent Teacher Association. The PTA currently has over 800,000 members and has a long history of child advocacy and parent training. PTA works "to support and speak on behalf of children and youth in the schools, in the community, and before governmental bodies, and other organizations that make decisions affecting children; to assist parents in developing the skills they need to raise and protect their children; and to encourage parent and public involvement in the public schools of this nation."[30]

One avenue overlooked by many parents is contacting other parents with similar concerns to form their own social action group.[31] House meetings can be set up to discuss problems the children are having in school and how the group believes these problems can best be addressed.[32] Priorities can be established, a strategy developed for approaching school staff, petitioning the school board, and speaking out at school board meetings.[33] The Alliance Schools Initiative (see p. 5) distinguishes between parental involvement, which is passive and tends to maintain the existing school culture, and parental engagement. "Parental engagement views parents as citizens in the fullest sense—change agents who can transform inner city schools and neighborhoods."[34] Finding ways to expand parental involvement will require creativity and open mindedness from both parents and schools.

What Schools Can Do

While research has documented the positive effects of parental involvement for children, less is known about how to elicit productive participation and which practices schools should use to maximize their investment in family and school connections.[35] One study by the U.S. Department of Education found that *how* schools encourage parental participation is more influential than family attributes like marital status, family size, level of parents' education, student grade level, or even socioeconomic status in predicting whether parents get involved.[36]

Parent involvement increases when the administration and staff of a school communicate a genuine desire to involve parents by considering their needs.[37] For instance, when schools accommodate parents' work schedules by arranging meetings at times when parents can be available, the cooperation is more successful.[38] Finding ways to include both mother and father in the education of children is important.

All parties concerned benefit when parents engage in joint learning activities with their children. Some activities increase communication between the generations, build mutual respect, and train students

to compare points of view and think abstractly.[39] One such activity is having parents view a selected television program with their children and then discuss its merits or weaknesses.[40] Another might be to have children write books containing stories told them by parents and grandparents during interviews.[41] These activities also provide parents and grandparents with opportunities to communicate moral and ethical values to their children as they tell their stories.[42] When this is done as a school assignment, teachers benefit by gaining a greater understanding of their students' cultural environment and parents' concerns. In addition, barriers of fear are reduced as parents realize they do not have to be knowledgeable in all subject areas in order to participate in their children's education.[43]

Following are several interventions both schools and parents can implement to increase communication and involvement.

- Train teachers to work with parents and to view them as partners in the education of their children.[44]
- Arrange contacts in neutral settings; offer informal classes in parenting, ESL, GED, or other topics of interest.[45]
- Arrange transportation for parents who do not own a vehicle.[46]
- Consider establishing a home/school coordinator to develop programs and act as a liaison between teachers and families.[47]
- Encourage mothers and fathers to attend and speak out in steering committees and task forces.[48]
- Encourage an active Parent Teacher Association.

Conclusion

Family involvement in the education of children is essential to academic success. While research has shown parental involvement with schools has a significant impact on the achievement of children, several barriers stand in the way of full involvement from parents. Negative communication to families from the school diminishes trust on the part of parents who may feel humiliated for their own and their children's lack of educational progress. Parents for whom English is a second language, may have difficulty understanding and may feel discriminated against for their inability to converse in English. Workers in low-paying jobs often must work long hours to earn enough to support their families and may not be able to attend school meetings. Addressing these barriers to parental involvement is necessary to enhance the learning capabilities of all children. This is especially true for children whose learning is hindered by disadvantages or stress in their home or environment.

It is also vital to address the misunderstandings and fears of both parents and teachers in communicating with one another. Parents are often reluctant to be involved in schools, because they fear judgment and criticism from the school staff and administration. Teachers, on the other hand, sometimes oppose parent involvement in the areas in which educators have traditionally held power. Training teachers in the most effective ways to involve parents may open lines of communication and minimize distrust on the part of parents. Another useful intervention is educating parents and other community members on how to best work with teachers and school administration to improve schools and neighborhoods.

Finally, more research is needed to understand what types of parental involvement are most beneficial. It is not clear, for instance, what the optimal level of participation is, what the saturation point is at which involvement becomes less helpful, and how the impact of involvement can affect parents' feelings about their children, parents' literacy, and self-esteem.

Even without the answers to all these questions, it is clear that students achieve more when parents provide good reading materials in the home, monitor the television, supervise homework, and hold reasonably high expectations of their children's performance. Parents can also work together with school officials to improve school policy. Model programs like the one presented in the box on page five have blazed the path for other schools to increase student performance by involving parents in their children's education.

A Model Program: The Alliance Schools Initiative

The Alliance Schools Initiative is a community-based program to increase student achievement in low-income areas throughout Texas. Since 1991, the Alliance Schools Initiative has focused on bringing parents together with teachers and community leaders to try to solve problems in schools, learn about school reform practices, and to work together to address the needs of children and their families. The number of schools participating in the Alliance Initiative has expanded to118 in 1997-98, serving 80,307 students in Texas. About 50 more schools are in the process of becoming Alliance schools. Among the students in Alliance schools, 83 percent are considered economically disadvantaged.

The Alliance Schools Initiative is a partnership between the Texas Industrial Areas Foundation (TIAF) Network, the Interfaith Education Fund, and the Texas Education Agency (TEA). The initiative focuses on restructuring the relationship among stakeholders in school communities, including parents, teachers, school administrators, students, community and business leaders, and public officials. The initiative teaches the art of communication – exchanging ideas, debate, and compromise – in order to change the culture of schools and neighborhoods.

The strategy used by this initiative increases parental engagement, teacher morale, and student success at Alliance school campuses. Some methods used by Alliance schools include:

- Core teams, consisting of the principal, teachers, parents, and other community members, are trained to conduct house meetings where community members, parents, and school staff communicate their concerns and construct a plan of action for the school.
- Walk for Success, or neighborhood walks, where teachers, parents, church members, and administrators walk the streets of the neighborhood and engage parents in conversations about the school.
- School staff receive important training to offer education, services, and training for parents and community leaders who participate in school reform efforts.
- At one Alliance school in Dallas, a core team, consisting of the principal, teachers, parents, and other community members, hand-delivers report cards to the home of every student with at least one failing grade.
- A staff person keeps parents apprised of important dates and informs them of their children's scholastic performance.
- Parents learn how to help their children with homework.
- Other classes that can be offered are based on needs identified by the parents themselves. Possible class choices include: parenting skills, English as a Second Language, adult literacy, and computer literacy.

All of these strategies are designed to get parents more engaged in their children's education. It seems to work; the original Alliance Schools have increased the average percentage of students passing all sections of the TAAS standardized tests by 33 percent since 1993. Between 1997 and 1998, 87 percent of all Alliance schools increased their percentage of students passing all sections of the TAAS. The increase in students passing was 9.9 percent of students in the average alliance school compared to 4.5 percent for the state as a whole. Economically disadvantaged students improved at an even higher rate (8.3%).

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